



*Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology*



BLACK-FIGURE  
AND  
RED-FIGURE  
GREEK POTTERY



*University of Toronto Press*



# Black-Figure and Red-Figure Greek Pottery



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## BLACK-FIGURE AND RED-FIGURE GREEK POTTERY

GREEK pottery was not produced for museums, ancient or modern. With few exceptions, such as the ceremonial loutrophorus in Plate 8, it was intended for daily use: plain wares for the kitchen, decorated vases for dinner parties (Pl. 6 B). In fact pottery was one of the great staples of Athens' Mediterranean-wide commerce, and its technical and aesthetic superiority over all other Greek wares was one of the reasons for her political and economic predominance in the later sixth and fifth centuries B.C. The high quality was maintained by keen competition among the various Athenian potteries, and both the makers and the decorators of the vases sometimes signed their products (Pl. 1 A), occasionally adding a vaunt of their superior excellence.

The handicraftsman had reason to be proud of his product. The clay of these Athenian vases is smooth, has a vigorous reddish tone, and the glossy jet-black "glaze" (improperly so called) was the result of a long tradition of experiments (Pl. 9). The potter's skill in "throwing" the vases on the wheel is evidenced by the extreme delicacy of contour (Pl. 5 A), which exhibits the same sensitivity of the Greek eye for the beauty of the curved line as we see in a statue of Praxiteles or the carved mouldings of a Greek temple.

Most designers of pottery, ancient or modern, have been satisfied to use geometrical patterns, formal landscape designs, or the like. But to the Greeks *man* was the measure of all things, and their art is full of the activities of *man*. Scenes of war are common (Pls. 2B, 3B, 5B), of high adventure (Pls. 1B, 2A, 3A, 11A), of the worship of the gods or tales of their doings (Pls. 7B, 9A), of sport (Pl. 4A), and of everyday life: courtship, marriage, carousal, parting, death (Pls. 9B, 8, 6B, 5B, 11B). For the average person today these

pictures bring "the Greeks" to life; for the student of social history they are an inexhaustible storehouse of information.

Greek pottery may therefore well engage our interest in its own right as a "minor art"; it can also claim a wider importance as illustrating successive stages in the development of drawing, especially in view of the total loss of the masterpieces of Greek painting. The impulse to this development was provided by a change of technique. The earlier "black-figure" artists used the black glaze as a silhouette on the red clay ground and incised the details of their drawings with a sharp tool, sometimes with all the skill of a master engraver (Pl. 1B); but about 530 B.C. they began to reverse the process, reserving the figures in the red clay against the black ground, and drawing the inner detail with fine brushes.

Both methods, with their contrasts of light and dark, made splendid vase decoration, but the new "red-figure" style permitted much greater subtlety of execution. Hitherto figures had been drawn in silhouettes made up of awkwardly joined side-view legs with front-view chests, profile faces with full-front eyes: each part done in its easiest and most recognizable aspect, regardless of the resulting inconsistencies. Bodies were unnaturally proportioned and movements stiff and halting.

By the time of the Persian Wars (490-480 B.C.) a great change has come about. Red-figure men and women are supple and graceful. Complex attitudes are rendered with ease; the drawing is vigorous and assured. It is the heyday of Attic vase painting.

Progress in the art of drawing, however, continued. By the middle of the fifth century (when Ictinus was designing the Parthenon and Phidias and Polygnotus were the leading spirits in sculpture and painting) many problems of foreshortening and of simple perspective had been solved. For the major art of painting these new discoveries in the representation of three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional medium opened up vast pos-

sibilities, but for vase decoration it meant a departure from the traditional flat decorative designs which soon spelled ruin. The vase painters became imitators instead of pioneers. In their efforts to create an impression of depth and mass by shading, by three-quarter views of the human figures, by perspective renderings of architecture, and by abandoning the conventional uniform ground-line for the figures and disposing them at varying levels to suggest different distances from the spectator (Pl. 11), they completely destroyed the fragile fabric of their pots. Instead of the close harmony that had prevailed between the vase form and its decoration, the two elements have now engaged in a competition which could only result in the death of both. By the end of the fifth century B.C. the painting of Greek vases had pretty well run its course; before the close of the fourth they had disappeared into the tombs and rubbish heaps of ancient cities to await their resurrection in the modern world at the hand of the archaeologist.

J.W.G.

#### NOTES TO THE PICTURES

*Title-page.* Cylix interior (Cat. No. 357). Youth dining; playing "cottabos" with cylix in his right hand.

##### *Plates*

- 1A It bears the name of Teisias, the Athenian, as potter.
- B Heracles (Hercules) wrestling with Triton, a mythical sea-monster. Purple is used for the monster's beard and fore-hair; white for his median line.
- 2A Heracles wrestling the Nemean Lion, the first of his "Twelve Labours"; Athena (Minerva), unarmed, and Heracles' friend and nephew, Iolaüs, stand by.
- B Warrior arming; no particular story intended. The painter (whose real name is unknown) has been dubbed the "Affected Painter" in reference to his style.

- 3A Heracles brings back the Erymanthian Boar to his frightened taskmaster, Eurystheus; another of the "Labours." Again Athena and Iolaüs. By the "Antimenes Painter."
- B Warrior with charioteer about to depart for battle; a trousered oriental archer nearby. Also by the "Antimenes Painter."
- 4 Given, as the inscription proclaims, as a prize in the games at Athens in honour of Athena. By the "Eucharides Painter."
- 5A This and the following vases are in the red-figure style. Notice the continuous flow of line from lip to foot, and the fine adaptation of the handles to the shape of the vase. Painted by Macron.
- B In the court of his home (column and courtyard altar) a young soldier is arming; his mother holds his spear and shield, his knapsack on the wall. By the "Telephus Painter."
- 6A Cylix interior. Youth with (empty) pitcher and wine sack.
- B Exterior. Gentlemen, with female entertainer, carousing.
- 7A Greek humour! When the drinker had about drained the copious cup what a start to see such a "mirrored" face (the Gorgon) staring at him!
- B Dionysus, god of wine, in gay procession with a satyr and maenad. By the "Agrigento Painter."
- 8 A ceremonial vase used for bringing water for the bride's bath on her marriage eve; wedding scenes are appropriately represented. By Polygnotus.
- 9A Two youths at a blazing altar. By the "Pig Painter."
- B Youth offering wreath to lady with open jewel box on her lap. By the "Phiale Painter."
- 10A Satyr pursuing Maenad.
- B Also by the "Phiale Painter."
- 11A Atalanta (one foot on altar), Meleager, and others who took part in the Calydonian Boar Hunt. By the "Meleager Painter."
- B Offerings made at a tomb. Made in South Italy.





1A. Scyphus (drinking-cup). Cat. No. 346  
Diam.  $10\frac{1}{4}$  in. Second half VI century B.C.



1B. Detail from an amphora. Cat. No. 299  
Third quarter VI century B.C.





2A. Panel amphora (for wine). Cat. No. 300  
Ht. 15¾ in. Mid VI century B.C.



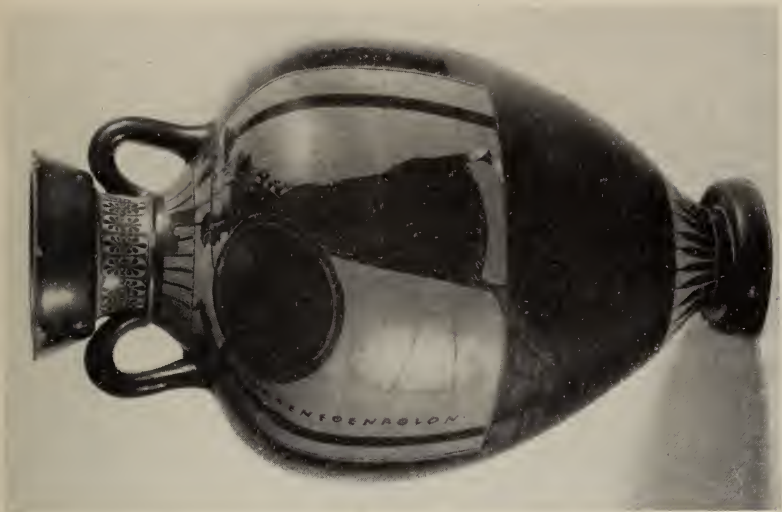
2B. Amphora. Cat. No. 298  
Ht. 16¾ in. Third quarter VI century B.C.



3A. Amphora with cover. Cat. No. 305  
Ht. 16 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Third quarter VI century B.C.



3B. Amphora. Cat. No. 303  
Ht. 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Third quarter VI century B.C.



4. Panathenaic amphora. Cat. No. 350  
Ht. 25¼ in. First quarter V century B.C.



- 5A. Cylinx. Cat. No. 356  
Diam.  $11\frac{1}{4}$  in. First quarter V century B.C.
- 5B. Cylinx. Cat. No. 354  
Diam.  $8\frac{1}{4}$  in. Second quarter V century B.C.





6. Cylix. Cat. No. 356 (see 5A)



7A. Cylix. Cat. No. 292. Diam. 8 in. Late VI century B.C.

7B. Crater (mixing bowl for wine). Cat. No. 364. Ht. 18 in. 2nd quarter V century B.C.



8. Loutrophoros (marriage vase). Cat. No. 635  
Ht.  $30\frac{3}{4}$  in. Third quarter V century B.C.





9A. Pelice (wine storage). Cat. No. 365  
Ht. 13½ in. Second quarter V century B.C.



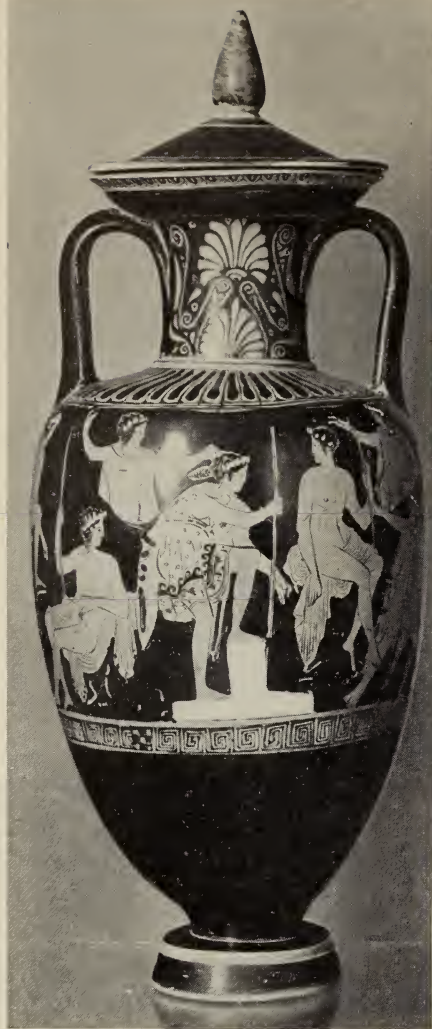
9B. Hydria (water-jar). Cat. No. 362  
Ht. 10¾ in. Third quarter V century B.C.



10A. Rhyton (drinking horn). Cat. No. 358  
Ht. 8 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. Second quarter V century B.C.



10B. Rhyton. Cat. No. 360.  
Ht. 5 in. Third quarter V century B.C.



11A. Amphora. Cat. No. 388  
Ht.  $24\frac{3}{8}$  in. First third IV century  
B.C.



11B. Amphora. Cat. No. 389  
Ht.  $22\frac{3}{4}$  in. IV century B.C.



